

As the 100th Anniversary of the San Francisco Earthquake Approaches, the United States Mint Pays Homage to the Granite Lady

April 17, 2006

WASHINGTON — Tomorrow, April 18, 2006, is the 100th anniversary of the great San Francisco earthquake. In a tip of the hat to National Coin Week (April 16–22, 2006), the United States Mint is highlighting the Old Mint's role as San Francisco's financial rock in the recovery and re-building of the city.

The great earthquake and fire of 1906 struck San Francisco at dawn on April 18th, killing more than 3,000 people. Registering an estimated 7.8 on the Richter scale, the great earthquake destroyed 28,000 buildings, left more than half of the population of San Francisco homeless, and, along with the fire it sparked, caused damage equivalent to \$8.4 billion in today's dollars.

In 1906, the United States Mint at San Francisco occupied a building now known as the Old Mint at the corner of Mission and 5th Streets. The Old Mint withstood the seismic tremors of the great earthquake, one of only two buildings still intact for many blocks, and one of the few intact buildings in the entire city. Historians believe that the Old Mint may have been called "Granite Lady" before the earthquake, but it certainly earned the nickname in 1906.

"In the tradition of outstanding public service to the nation, the employees of the San Francisco Mint displayed courage, resourcefulness and community spirit, saving the Old Mint, assisting the homeless and helping restore the financial infrastructure of the city," said United States Mint Acting Director David A. Lebryk.

Fifty employees were working at the United States Mint in San Francisco when the earthquake struck at 5:12 a.m. Along with ten soldiers, they risked their lives to save the building from two waves of fire that would consume most of San Francisco. Using recently installed fire hydrants and closing iron shutters on the lower floors, employees, led by a machinist foreman, fought off the first wave of fire from the east and the south.

Seventy feet of one-inch hose and a steam pump forced water from the United States Mint's artesian well into various parts of the building. Employees led by Superintendent Frank Leach heroically fought off a second and larger wall of fire that swept down Market Street and merged with a blaze underway at the Emporium Building. The second fire gutted every structure in that part of town but the Granite Lady. Despite the devastation, employees reported for work the next day, and Superintendent Leach cabled the Department of the Treasury in Washington, "Our flag is still flying."

The Old Mint sustained \$53,400 damage to windows, stonework, roof and smokestacks (approximately \$1.2 million in today's dollars), but within a short time employees were able to generate electricity to light the Granite Lady and the streets around the building. The artesian well provided clean water to thousands of people for several weeks.

Employees at the United States Mint at Philadelphia raised \$863.69 in relief for their fellow employees in San Francisco, the equivalent of about \$18,000 today.

The Old Mint was the only financial institution in San Francisco left standing, including the Sub-Treasury, which supplied money to the region's banks. Financial panic began to rise. Approached by a group of bankers, the San Francisco Mint sought and received permission from Treasury to create a central bank (or financial clearinghouse) for the city, opening its doors on April 30, and disbursing about a half million dollars in the first three days. At President Theodore Roosevelt's request, the Old Mint also became the depository and treasury for relief funds from the U.S. Government to the stricken area. Recovery was accelerated because of the United States Mint's efforts.

A bronze medal honoring the Old Mint (1874–1937) and another medal celebrating the current United States Mint at San Francisco are available for purchase and can be ordered online at www.usmint.gov or by phone at 1-800-872-6468.

The United States Mint web site features a section just for children and their teachers called the United States Mint H.I.P. Pocket Change™. During National Coin Week, the United States Mint H.I.P. Pocket Change will feature a special activity each day at www.usmint.gov/kids. National Coin Week, sponsored by the American Numismatic Association, emphasizes that coin

collecting is educational and fun. In honor of Benjamin Franklin’s 300th birthday, the theme for 2006 is “A Penny Saved is History Learned.”

For images of the Old Mint at San Francisco in the immediate aftermath of the great earthquake and fire of 1906, go to please [click here](#).

Sources: United States Geological Survey (USGS), National Archives Pacific Region and Annual Report of the Director of the Mint, 1906.

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